

Wounded Spirits, Ailing Hearts 3 Interview Written Video Transcript

Many veterans remember their tour of duty in Vietnam as "the year I never slept." Veterans say the jungles of Vietnam clung like a wet blanket. Their days were filled with long marches and near physical [00:00.20.00] collapse. Ants, leeches, and snakes were constant companions. Along with the physical discomforts, they also experienced a constant, gnawing fear. Vietnam was a modern war, stateside one day in rice patties the next. The US mission [00:00.40.00] was ill-defined and the country deeply divided about American involvement in a foreign war. For Native Americans, Vietnam was a dramatic shift in social and cultural worlds. Many veterans told us Vietnam turned everything they believed upside down.

It was a shock. [00:01.00.00] After I got to boot camp, it seems like everything I had learned growing up was just reversed and it was hard to accept.

Most Native American soldiers experienced [00:01.20.00] a form of racism they had never known back home and though the bigotry often came (from) ignorance its effect was still painful.

The officers and people over there just they give you all kinds of names, like (Indian blankets), [00:01.40.00] chiefs. Always, I hate that word, chiefs.

At the time I went to military, I didn't know, I didn't know nothing about being prejudiced or anything like that, you know. When I went to boot camp, the first thing, the first thing that they started throwing at me, [00:02.00.00] started calling me a fucking Indian and blanket ass and squaw man. I didn't know what the hell that meant, you know. I went to school with Blacks, Chicanos, and whites and all I saw was a human being. I didn't see no color. [00:02.20.00]

American Indian soldiers were often mistaken for the Vietnamese because of the color of their skin, their features, and stature. They were even mistaken for the enemy by their own troops. And Native Americans heard troubling echoes of their own personal history. Their great-grandparents, [00:02.40.00] even grandparents, had once been subjugated by a colonizing army. At times, the U.S. mission in Vietnam was a reminder of this not so distant past.

I'm talking about the aftereffects of trauma. And I believe that historically, Native [00:03.00.00] Americans have been traumatized way, way back. And it's an experience that's been passed on. Because from the experience, there's behaviors and there's feelings and there's [00:03.20.00] attitudes that came, I suppose, developed from that trauma from way back and it just kind of got passed on from one generation to another.



But the most disturbing aspect of Vietnam involves an intrinsic conflict between the [00:03.40.00] Indian and Native sense of duty to the military and their view of themselves as warriors.

I guess I just got real tired of doing the PTSD shuffle and hiding and harboring these feelings of guilt and [00:04.00.00] shame and anger and all of these other things. And how could I have these things and be a Lakota warrior? Things just did not add up. You know, is this the way it's supposed to be for me? Is this part of what [00:04.20.00] the responsibility entails, you know? And what it amounted to was confusion.

Oh, you're supposed to be brave and all that, [00:04.40.00] you know. And not to be afraid of anything, you know. And here, I'm afraid all the time, you know. And I can't—I'm always afraid of things and (all those things that have happened), you know. And I'm not supposed to think like that. But here I am. Here I am like that, you know. [laughs] And that makes me [00:05.00.00] think that I'm just, you know, thinking myself as less of a—short of being a traditional man I'll say, you know. Because my dad was very traditional and my grandfathers were very traditional and I try to follow in their footsteps.

[End of audio]

